

Finding the Better Idea

Story by Curt Biberdorf

WHEN Dave Cheney was a senior enlisted adviser visiting Alaska with a project engineer who was developing new load-bearing equipment in 1978, he was struck by the sight of a soldier shivering in the cold while on guard duty.

"I said to myself, 'This guy is freezing,'" said Cheney, the Operational Forces Interface Group (OFIG) team leader at the U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center in Natick, Mass.

"When I asked the executive officer, who was in a heated tent, if the cold weather was a problem for his troops, he said, 'No'. Then I knew we had to go to the soldier, the individual user, to get firsthand information."

Seeking soldiers' feedback about the performance of items they wear or carry and the food they eat has been the hallmark of OFIG since it was established in 1986.

Cheney said the then-commander of the Department of Army Materiel Development and Readiness (now Army Materiel Command) was concerned about getting soldier feedback on the items the department makes available to soldiers. So the

director of what is now the Natick Soldier Center established an office to get the feedback needed.

That office grew from one officer and one civilian employee to a staff of two enlisted advisers, three engineering psychologists, six equipment specialists, an exhibit coordinator, an administrative assistant and a team leader.

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OFIG acquires customer feedback through installation visits, user assessments, and exhibits or technical displays. When called upon, quick-reaction teams respond to deployed units that need immediate assistance.

≡ Visits

Installation visits are the core of OFIG. The team initially visited four installations per year. That's been expanded to as many as 10 visits annually, with at least one visit each

to a Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force base.

Within two weeks after returning from a training exercise or deployment, soldiers are rallied together to fill out surveys tailored to their type of unit, and they're interviewed to help OFIG representatives gauge their satisfaction with items developed at the Soldier Systems Center.

"We tell them that they have an opportunity to make changes," said equipment specialist Max Biela. "We always urge users to be perfectly honest in their assessments."

"They're candid," said Cheney, "but little surprises me. The only thing that does surprise me is to find out that a unit hasn't received something it should have received months earlier because it's stuck in a supply room."

Surveys have shown that the infantryman spends an average of \$400 of his own money purchasing military gear. What he buys provides additional information to the team, Biela said.

Through its surveys, OFIG learns whether commonly purchased items should be brought into the system.

≡ Response

Sometimes a response to the feedback can't wait, which is why,



Through its questionnaires, OFIG solicits feedback from soldiers about clothing, equipment and rations.

since the Gulf War, OFIG has employed a team that can immediately investigate problems with fielded equipment, or provide support to soldiers who have new equipment, wherever they're deployed around the world.

In some cases OFIG equipment specialists, many of whom have extensive military experience, have responded to problems or emergencies by escorting equipment to its destination and providing any needed training.

During Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm equipment specialists noted that many supplies were never distributed, because shipping containers arrived minus any type of label to identify what was inside or where it was to be delivered. Now every shipping container contains a bar-code sticker to avoid confusion and delays.

In Macedonia, equipment specialists learned that soldiers were putting wood screws into the tread of their Intermediate Cold/Wet Boots for traction, because the boots themselves provided little traction. More recently, a team from OFIG traveled to Afghanistan to try to resolve issues with

cold-weather clothing in the mountain environment.

Assessment

Well before any product is fielded, OFIG assists project managers in locating units that have volunteered to provide assessments of the product. OFIG additionally works with an evaluator from the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command to ensure the unit and equipment meet the Army requirements outlined in the Operational Requirements Document and Test and Evaluation Master Plan.

Whether it's skis for soldiers in Alaska, boots for trudging through mud in Central America or a new military ration entree, OFIG plays a role in ensuring soldiers will be satisfied with what they get, Cheney said. Soldiers' feedback becomes part of the process to determine whether an item should be fielded as is, or with improvements.


Displays

As OFIG grew and its members became knowledgeable in all commodity areas, exhibits became a part of their mission to advertise what they

do and broaden manufacturing resources. Because of an exhibit on Capitol Hill, the Soldier Enhancement Program was established and funded to reduce research and development time from as much as 10 years to less than three years. The shortened time is possible because OFIG representatives evaluate existing commercial items and recommend that they be adopted into the supply system.

Cheney said the exhibits at trade shows are meant to draw interest from industry and academia to what's going on at the Soldier Systems Center. The OFIG group travels to as many as 60 locations annually, sometimes simultaneously, setting up exhibits.

"Information is important to soldiers," Cheney said. "They want to know what's going to be fielded. Their lives are on the line, and OFIG is there for them to ensure the equipment they ultimately receive is going to be what they need and want."

The Soldier Systems Center is part of the U.S. Army Soldier and Biological Chemical Command. 



For more info on soldiers' evaluations of items they use, visit:
www.sbccom.army.mil.